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ABSTRACT

During the past 40 years, several generations of American children have grown up with the Nation of Israel as a historical reality. Whether Jewish or Gentile, juvenile readers have absorbed a version of the story that recapitulates in modern dress the biblical story of the children of Hagar and Sarah, reinforced by American attitudes toward people of color and non-western cultures. Because children are strongly affected by what they read and hear, an examination of the image of the Arab in American children's fiction may illuminate attitudes which have prevented American Jews and non-Jews from seeing Palestinians as human beings. The image of Arabs as brutal terrorists pervades even those children's books that depict friendships between Arab and Israeli children. In many of these novels, the apparent contradiction between images of Arabs as both potential friends and potential enemies is resolved, or skirted, by means of the distinction made between local villagers who have made peace with Israeli settlers and Arabs from over the border who make trouble. Beneath the often facile pleas for peace are the same assumptions that have blocked Arab-Israeli reconciliation for over 40 years: the assumption that the Israeli enterprise is the only one that matters in the Middle East, and that those Arabs who do not support it wholeheartedly are terrorists, monsters, or worse. (Eighteen references are attached.) (RS)

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My Cousin the Arab

The biblical story of the children of Hagar and Sarah tells of two half brothers, bound by a common father and divided by inequality. In the Old Testament, Abraham's younger son Isaac, the child of his Hebrew wife Sarah, is heir to God's covenant promising Abraham and his descendants the land "from the River of Egypt to the Great River, the River Euphrates" (*Genesis*, XV:18). Ishmael, the firstborn, is the offspring of Sarah's Egyptian slave Hagar, and is both envied and despised by his half brother. When Sarah insists that Abraham drive out Hagar and Ishmael, so that the slave girl's son will not share her son's inheritance, God reassures Abraham: "Do not be vexed on account of the boy and the slave-girl. Do what Sarah says, because you shall have descendants through Isaac. I will make a great nation of the slave girl's son too, because he is your own child" (*Genesis*, XI, 17-18). At that moment, a well miraculously appears, and mother and son are saved.

In this story of rivalry between two half brothers and their mothers, the Hebrew writer stresses that God's covenant with Abraham applies only to Isaac; yet the repeated references to God's protection of Ishmael (the name is a pun on a Hebrew word meaning "God will hear"), suggest that he too is the heir of

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Father Abraham, inferior in status, yet worthy of God's special protection. From the Old Testament onward, the story of these two children has been retold from this perspective, a history of half brothers whose destinies are unequal but inextricably intertwined. In modern times, the story has been rephrased, but the "great nation" to which Ishmael was progenitor is still the stepchild of Father Abraham.

During the past forty years, several generations of American children have grown up with the Nation of Israel as a historical reality. Whether Jewish or Gentile, juvenile readers have absorbed a version of the story that recapitulates in modern dress the myth of Isaac and Ishmael, reinforced by American attitudes toward people of color and non-western cultures. Both in the media and in the classroom, American children have been presented with an image of Arabs and Palestinians as stupid and lazy at best, or terrorists and rapists at worst. A 1975 survey by the Middle East Studies Association's Committee on the Image of the Middle East in Secondary Education found that "the majority of books erred in content, perpetuated stereotypes in political and social description, oversimplified complicated issues, listed outcomes while ignoring causes, and often provided moral judgments on the actions of nations in the guise of factual history," with "frequent" and "flagrant" stereotypes (2). More recently, Prof. Jack Shaheen of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville surveyed 293 teachers in five states, asking them to write down the names of any humane or heroic screen Arab they had

seen. Five noted past portraits of Ali Baba and Sinbad, one mentioned "those Arabs" in "The Lion of the Desert" and "The Wind and the Lion," and the remaining 287 wrote "none."

Since fiction is a more complicated genre than either the textbook or the TV show, one would expect a more complex portrait of the Arab in juvenile and young adult literature. Yet a survey of some 30-odd titles written over the past 30 years reveals that fictional portrayals of Arabs and Arab culture differ little from the racist stereotypes in movies, TV and textbooks. Palestinian Arabs in children's literature remain the children of Hagar--sometimes evil, sometimes good, but always subordinate and inferior to their European cousins. Yet like the Hebrew writer in the Old Testament, modern writers of children's fiction are aware, if only subliminally, that the children of Hagar are half brothers and sisters to the children of Sarah. Children's books about Israel reflect a profound ambivalence--sometimes conscious, sometimes not--about Arab characters and the relationship between Jews and Arabs in Israel. Often in these novels, Jews and Arabs become friends, with positive and hopeful implications. When such friendships fail, as they almost always do, the Arabs are frequently the villains; but sometimes the breakdown of friendships is linked to a breakdown of all human relations in an atmosphere of mistrust and warfare that victimizes Jewish and Arab children alike, In a few novels, where Arab children are seen as fully rounded, sympathetic characters, the continuing conflict between the children of Hagar and Sarah has tragic

dimensions. Yet underlying even the most sympathetic portrayal of Arab characters is the continuing assumption that it is they who need to learn from the Israelis, and that peace will come only when Arabs become more like Jews.

Because we are all strongly affected by what we read and hear as children, an examination of the image of the Arab in American children's fiction may illuminate attitudes which have prevented American Jews and non-Jews from seeing Palestinians as human beings. The longing for peace that pervades these juvenile novels should remind us of war's devastating effect on children, its most innocent victims; and the portrayals of Arabs and Arab Jewish relations may help us re-evaluate our own assumptions about these two peoples, who must surely learn to live together or perish.

By the time Israeli statehood was declared in 1948, writers were creating stories in which newly arrived Jewish settlers met and interacted with their Arab neighbors in Palestine. And, since postwar Zionism was strongly affected by the destruction of European Jewry, it is not surprising that many of the Jewish children in these early novels are Holocaust survivors, and that the Arabs they encounter are perceived through the lens of recent Jewish persecution. In James Forman's young adult novel <u>My Enemy, My Brother</u>, set before and during the 1948 war, a group of survivors from Eastern Europe must decide whether to engage in military practice along with their farming activities. Gideon, the most embittered and defensive of the young people, justifies

his militarism by comparing Arabs to Nazis ready to perpetrate another Holocaust: "It'll be like Poland. They'll slaughter us, and their women will come along to pick up souvenirs" (207). Dan, Gideon's peace-loving friend, is unconvinced, and chooses to serve the kibbutz as a shepherd in the nearby hills, where he befriends an Egyptian boy named Said. Yet when war breaks out, Dan too becomes a soldier, and in a moment of confusion shoots Said's father. In his grief and revulsion, Dan thinks again of Jews, Arabs and Nazis, but this time with tragic irony: "He felt he had become less than a Nazi, for even the Nazis had some satanic purpose in their slaughtering. . . . He had become as vile as his life's enemies" (227).

The friendship between Dan and Said reflects the reality that in pre-1948 Palestine, and even up to the 1967 war, there was a great deal of contact between Arabs and Jews, not all of it hostile. Almost every children's novel about Israel includes a cross-cultural friendship, but though these friendships suggest that it is possible for Arabs and Jews to coexist, the coexistence is on Israeli terms, and the Arab children are still the lesser brothers. Arabs living in "primitive" villages befriend kibbutz settlers because they admire their superior management of the land and its resources and their superior technology. In The Mukhtar's Children, the patriarch of an Arab village accepts the idea of Israeli statehood after his daughter has saved her mother's life with the aid of Israeli-style medicine. In The Stone of Peace, an Arab boy visiting a kibbutz

is so entranced by the tractor that he tries to drive it himself and wrecks it.

In addition to technology, Arab children learn humane behavior from their Israeli friends: a Jordanian boy in One More River learns from an American girl that he must not beat his donkey (though she cannot talk him out of his violent hatred for the Jews who have defeated his people in the 1948 and 1967 wars). In other novels, young Arabs are impressed by Israeli values of communal living, constant hard work, and modern farming techniques. Studying at a kibbutz is often a reward for the Arab children who befriend Israelis; in the short story "Lost on Mt. Tabor," Ahmed, a Bedouin boy who has rescued a lost Israeli, is offered the opportunity to go to school with Oved in Nahalal, so that he can return to his tribe and teach other children what he has learned.

Since the Israeli ways are always superior, "good" or sympathetic Arabs are the ones who recognize the value of Israeli education. Their attitude is expressed by Sheik Hassan, in The Stone of Peace: "Those Israelis were always up and about. They had no time to talk to each other for hours about the famous sheik who was their famous great-grandfather, or about whose was the most perfect camel for miles around. For them nothing existed but work. And after work they sat with their noses in their books." Unlike the newcomers, the Bedouins "liked nothing better than to sit in the shade of a tree, keeping a lazy eye on their camels"(53). "Bad" Arabs, who are either misguided or

malicious, resist "progress" and cling to their old ways. Nowhere does a children's writer suggest that the nomadic existence, with its camel herding, meeting at the communal well, and ritualized socializing and storytelling, has any value as a way of life.

Though these stories of Arab-Israeli friendships usually take place in an Israeli context, we do occasionally glimpse Arab family life as Israeli characters visit their friends at home. Often the settings are warm and exotic, with many rituals of hospitality and much drinking of Arab coffee. At the same time, Arab women and girls are portrayed as intimidated and oppressed, and the Israeli children often decide it is their mission to free their oppressed sisters from the patriarchal yoke by arguing or reasoning with the fathers, who are always shocked at the assertiveness of Israeli girls. The unspoken assumption is that without Israeli intervention, these Arab women would have continued in their oppression indefinitely.

In some novels, Arab children interact with Jewish adults, who are drawn to their appealing ways. In Abu, a street-wise Jerusalem urchin with "bulky pockets, floppy coat, dirty face" and a cigar in his mouth, is befriended by an Israeli soldier on leave from the 1967 war (11). Abu idolizes his benefactor and wants to accompany him to his kibbutz; Itzhak is faced with a painful choice between abandoning Abu and leaving the kibbutz, whose members will never allow him to adopt an Arab child. He decides in favor of Abu, but is saved from actually having to

leave the kibbutz when Abu is killed by a terrorist grenade.

Several juvenile novels describe romantic relationships between Arab and Jewish adolescents. Only one, Anton Reboul's prizewinning novel Thou Shalt Not Kill (originally published in French), tells the story from the Arab point of view. In this book, an Egyptian boy and an Israeli girl, both soldiers in the 1967 war, are drawn together after he wounds her in a gunfight. Together they cross the desert and confront a series of natural disasters, until they are rescued by soldiers from both sides. Bonded in a spare, symbolic plot that suggests how deeply they need each other, Simmy and Slimane agree to live together and devote their lives to ending the hostilities between their two nations. Unlike most American novels, where the quest for peace is depicted on Israeli terms, Thou Shalt Not Kill ends with its protagonists agreeing to divide their time evenly between Egypt and Israel as they work for peace.

More typical of romantic relationships between Arabs and Jews is the love affair between Hassan and Ora in My Cousin the Arab, a novel set in pre-1947 Palestine. Their romance is doomed because Hassan does not recognize the justice of the Zionist cause. When he defends the feelings of "patriotic Palestinians," Ora turns against him: "'Patriotic Palestinians!' Ora retorted. Her voice was sarcastic. 'Hassan, you don't know how comical you sound! The Arab has no national patriotism--only *tribal* loyalty! The only real patriotism this country knows is the patriotism *we've* had for two thousand years!'" (181). Since no one in the

novel contradicts this outburst, we are left to conclude that Hassan and his people do not deserve Palestine--just as Hassan does not deserve Ora.

Although hostile Arabs like Hassan can be found in most children's books about Israel, they seem to proliferate after 1976. One may speculate that the increasing militarization of Israeli society has led authors to project on to "the other" alarming qualities in society at large--violence, irrationality, a hatred of the enemy so intense that it embraces extreme acts of terrorism. Thus in juvenile fiction, the Hagannah (the Israeli army) and its secret strike arm, the Irgun, are portrayed as defense forces taking extraordinary measures to protect the welfare of the Jewish people in Israel; yet Arabs who engage in similar practices are seen as violent and inhuman, acting purely out of hatred. Almost every novel, even those in which Arabs and Jews become friends, includes an attack by "Arab terrorists" whose only goal is to destroy the Jews. Sometimes the attackers are nearby villagers who want the Israelis off "their" land; sometimes they are Arabs from across the border fighting in the service of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon or Jordan. In a short story, "The Children's Grove," a group of kibbutz children are dismayed by their teacher's account of the deliberate destruction of large groves of trees all over the country. One child suggests that the children go out and guard the trees: "We can hug the trees when the enemy comes; they wouldn't think of chopping down children." His teacher thinks: "How wonderful to be so innocent!

Would people who are subhuman, who don't mind throwing a bomb into a busload of women and children, or hurling flames into a children's nursery in the dark of night in order to burn down the house with its babies--would they hesitate to kill a child that clings to a tree?" (126-27). Later in the story, a pine grove that the children themselves have planted is destroyed. This story, a translation from an Israeli collection, is reminiscent of recent mailings by the Jewish National Fund, in which American Jews are urged to contribute money for the planting of trees to replace those burned by "terrorists." As readers, we cannot help but sympathize with the idealistic children whose lovely pine grove has been destroyed; yet as concerned adults we must also ask the questions that the children are too young to ask and the writers of these books never ask: what was this land, and who was living on it, before all those trees were planted?

The emphasis on Arab hatred for Jews occurs again and again in children's fiction, especially in books set during the 1967 war. In <u>One More River</u>, soldiers returning from the newly conquered Golan Heights bring enemy pamphlets and magazines with "cartoons of huge handsome Arab soldiers driving wretched, ugly, sniveling Jews into the Mediterranean and striding across a map of Israel with hobnailed boots." Meanwhile, the Israeli soldiers are praised for refusing to shell over the walls of the Old City: "It would have broken the Jordanian resistance, perhaps; but it might also have destroyed the Holy Places--not only Jewish, but Muslim and Christian" (239-40).

The image of Arabs as brutal terrorists (in contrast to the humane and "rational" Israelis) pervades even those children's books which depict friendships between Arab and Israeli children. The friendships are always the exception; the "enlightened" Arabs are always the few. Often the "peaceful" Arabs who befriend Israelis live among hostile relatives and villagers ready to destroy the peace-loving child and his Israeli friends. In one such story, A Time of Anger, Fared, an Arab boy who joins a kibbutz school, is taunted by his Communist friend Abdul, a cynical terrorist. Though Fared rejects Abdul and his philosophy, Fared's girlfriend Laila is killed by the explosion of a mine that has been laid by Abdul. In Lori, the efforts of some sympathetic Arabs to befriend a kibbutz near the Lebanese border are sabotaged when their vicious cousin and his friends from across the border infiltrate and attack the kibbutz during a Passover seder. In Abu, Itzhak the Israeli soldier ponders Arab "atrocities" during the Six Day War even as he acknowledges his affection for Abu.

Many juvenile novels set in Israel are adventure stories, with soldier-heroes. As one would expect, the images of Arabs in these novels are particularly virulent. Path Beneath the Sea, another novel translated from Hebrew, is set during the Six Day War and includes a scene in which Uri and his friends in the special frogmen forces are captured and beaten by Egyptian soldiers. A mob follows them through the street, yelling "Massacre the Jews!" Our hero confides: "I was familiar with the

character of Arabs from my own childhood days in Morocco. . . . The mob was enjoying the feeling of having the *Yahood* at its mercy; seeing their blood flow was to be the main performance" (163). Uri manages to talk his way out of the situation and to return home to his wife and little boy at the end of the war, praying for peace; but the prayer implies that it is the Arabs who are solely responsible for war. In Flight to the Promised Land, another adventure story, Shalom, a Yemenite Jewish immigrant, helps rescue his teacher, who has been kidnapped by Arabs; in The Sequin Syndicate, a mystery set just after the 1967 war, a group of *Gag* (the Israeli CIA) operatives recover a hidden stash of gold coins involved in a smuggling plot.

In many of these children's novels, the apparent contradiction between images of Arabs as both potential friends and potential terrorists is resolved, or skirted, with a distinction between "our" Arabs--local villagers who have made peace with the Israeli settlers--and Arabs from over the border, who invade and bomb and make trouble. The heroine of Lori is introduced to an Arab family, who give her a camel which she names Shalom-Salaam. But Shalom--Salaam is killed when invaders cross the Lebanese border to bomb the kibbutz. A Time of Anger ends with kibbutz settlers expressing gratitude to Israeli Arabs for their loyalty in the 1967 war; the villains are "foreign" Arabs who want to destroy Israel entirely. In The Mukhtar's Children, one of a trilogy of novels set before and after the 1948 war, the Mukhtar comes to see the virtues of being an

Israeli Arab, and to feel that his allegiance belongs with the State of Israel, rather than with non-Israeli Arabs. In The Year, the distinction between sympathetic and unsympathetic Arabs is not one of national borders but of religion. Lev explains to Anne that "most of the Lebanese are Christians. They want to leave us alone, and in turn, we leave them alone. The Syrians and Jordanians are hot-blooded Moslems, and often they cross these rear fields of ours and raid us from the Lebanese side, hoping to implicate their peaceful brothers" (42).

Sometimes the distinction between "good" and "bad" Arabs is a distinction between children and adults. Smoke over Golan, by the prolific Israeli children's author Uriel Ofek, focuses on the experiences of 10-year-old Eitan, an Israeli boy stranded on his own during the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Eitan has an Arab friend, Saleem, who lives just over the Syrian border and crosses into Israel to visit. The villain of the story (besides the entire Arab army) is a Syrian intelligence agent named Yussif, whom Eitan must hold prisoner. Here, as in other novels, the implication is that if politics were left to children, differences between Jews and Arabs would cease to matter, and peace would follow. War is the work of adults; children, in their innocence and goodness, know better. Such an assumption is likely to appeal to all readers, but especially to young people, the intended audience for these books.

But there is a dimension to these novels that is not innocent. True peace can only exist between equals, and the Arab

and Jewish children in these novels, however attractively portrayed, are not equals. Beneath the often facile pleas for peace are the same assumptions that have blocked Arab-Israeli reconciliation for over 40 years: the assumption that the Israeli enterprise is the only one that matters in the Middle East, and that those Arabs who do not support it wholeheartedly are terrorists, monsters or worse. American children reading these books may be moved to deplore the horrors of war; they may even sympathize with the Arab children who befriend their Israeli neighbors. But not until American readers encounter Israel from the Palestinian point of view will they be able to envision real alternatives to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and not until the children of Sarah recognize the children of Hagar as their brothers and sisters will all the children of Abraham be free to live in peace.

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